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ABSTRACT

Noting that it is only within the last decade that schools have begun to identify ways to optimize language use to promote higher level thinking, this ERIC Digest focuses on developing thinking skills in reading. The digest discusses the impetus for critical reading, the use of children's literature as a tool for teaching thinking skills, a classroom environment which fosters inquiry, the active reader, and the teacher's role. (RS)

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Teaching Critical Reading through Literature

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This *Digest* focuses on developing thinking skills in reading. Tierney and Pearson (1983) posit that readers draw on background experiences to compose a text, engaging in an ongoing negotiation to arrive at meaning. This is fundamental to the act of reading. For this reason, reading offers the potential for higher level thinking. Essential to the success of higher level reading is the reader's ability to relate new information to what is known in order to find answers to cognitive questions.

Another underlying principle in the instruction of higher order thinking skills in reading is the acceptance of the theme of active learning. Literacy scholar Paulo Freire contends that those who share in the learning process are empowered by a critical consciousness of themselves as meaning makers. Freire supports the position which suggests that it is language that provides the tool for meaning construction. Language is a thinking process which allows students to learn and grow.

Paradoxically, educators have had this tool at their fingertips for years, but have failed to respond to the cries for greater competency by looking to language as the source for improvement. It is only within the last decade, and particularly the last five years, that schools have begun to identify ways to optimize language use to promote higher level thinking.

Impetus for Critical Reading

An impetus for the re-evaluation of standard teaching methods of reading was the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) Report in 1981, which revealed that 85% of all 13-year-olds could correctly complete a multiple choice check on comprehension but only 15% could write an acceptable sentence summarizing the paragraph read. Learners were not able to reconstruct the structure and meaning of ideas expressed by others.

Not only were students unable to summarize, they were rarely encouraged to support an evaluative interpretation. Reading instruction reflected the lowest level of thinking—it lacked critical analysis.

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Today, professional organizations and the professional literature support critical thinking in the classroom and call for teachers to guide students in developing higher level thinking skills (Neilsen, 1989). Because teaching higher level cognitive processes requires comprehension, inference, and decision making, the reading classroom is the logical place to begin. These skills have been associated with reading instruction for years. Now, instead of being enrichment skills, they have become core skills.

Teaching students to think while reading is referred to in the professional literature as "critical reading." It is defined as "learning to evaluate, draw inferences, and arrive at conclusions based on evidence" (Carr, 1988). Children's literature is a powerful tool for teaching critical reading. It offers children the opportunity to actively engage in texts while simultaneously considering ideas, values, and ethical questions. Through literature, students learn to read personally, actively, and deeply (Sweet, 1993).

Classroom Environment

For active, critical reading to occur, teachers must create an atmosphere which fosters inquiry. Students must be encouraged to question, to make predictions, and to organize ideas which support value judgments. Two techniques for developing these kinds of critical reading skills include problem solving and learning to reason through reading. Flynn (1989) describes an instructional model for problem solving which promotes analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of ideas. She states that, "When we ask students to analyze we expect them to clarify information by examining the component parts. Synthesis involves combining relevant parts into a coherent whole, and evaluation includes setting up standards and then judging against them to verify the reasonableness of ideas."

Beck (1989) adopts a similar perspective, using the term "reasoning" to imply higher order thinking skills. Comprehension requires inferencing, which plays a central role in reasoning and problem solving. For Beck, children's literature has the potential to engage students in reasoning activities.

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When literature is approached from a problem solving perspective, students are asked to evaluate evidence, draw conclusions, make inferences, and develop a line of thinking (Riecken and Miller, 1990). According to Flynn (1989), children are capable of solving problems at all ages and need to be encouraged to do so at every grade level. (See, for example, "Using Fairy Tales" [1991] for young children; Anton [1990] for elementary children; Johannessen [1989] for middle school children.) Teachers may want to experiment with a particular children's book and plan a lesson which places reasoning at the center of instruction.

Wilson (1988) suggests that teachers re-think the way they teach reading and look critically at their own teaching/thinking processes. She cautions against skills lessons that are repackaged in the name of critical thinking but which are only renamed worksheets. She points out that teaching students to read, write, and think critically is a dramatic shift from what has generally taken place in most classrooms.

According to Wilson, critical literacy advocates the use of strategies and techniques like formulating questions prior to, during, and after reading; responding to the text in terms of the student's own values; anticipating texts, and acknowledging when and how reader expectations are aroused and fulfilled; and responding to texts through a variety of writing activities which ask readers to go beyond what they have read to experience the text in personal ways.

The Active Reader

Critical thinking implies that a reader is actively and constructively engaged in the process of reading. The reader is continually negotiating what s/he knows with what s/he is trying to make sense of. The role of background knowledge and the student's ability to draw upon it are essential to critical thinking/learning.

It is not an easy task to incorporate higher level thinking skills into the classroom, but it is a necessary one. For students to participate in the society in which they live, they must have experiences which prepare them for life. In order to become critical thinkers, it is essential that students learn to value their own thinking, to compare their thinking and their interpretations with others, and to revise or reject parts of that process when it is appropriate.

A classroom environment which is student-centered fosters student participation in the learning process. Learning that is both personal and collaborative encourages critical thinking. Students who are reading, writing, discussing, and interacting with a variety of learning materials in a variety of ways are more likely to become critical thinkers.

The Teacher's Role

Teachers who encourage pre-reading discussions to help readers activate prior knowledge or fill in gaps in background knowledge set the stage for critical reading. They help students identify purposes for reading, formulate hypotheses, and test the accuracy of their hypotheses throughout the reading process. In addition, asking students to examine their own reading and learning processes creates the awareness necessary for critical reading.

Post-reading activities that extend texts provide an opportunity for teachers to check for learning. Transforming ideas from reading into artwork, poetry, etc. is an evaluative, interpretive act that reveals the student's level of understanding.

Critical readers are active readers. They question, confirm, and judge what they read throughout the reading process. Students engaged in such activities are likely to become critical thinkers and learners.

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